

Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia

Alan Harler, Artistic Director
John French, Associate Conductor

Angels from on High

PROGRAM

In the Company of Angels Donald St. Pierre
Mendelssohn Club commission and premiere

Erin Swanson, soprano
Cory O'Neill Walker, tenor

* *Angels, We Have Heard on High*traditional French carol

* *O Come, All Ye Faithful* John Francis Wade

Messe Solennelle, Op. 16 Louis Vierne

1. Kyrie
2. Gloria
3. Sanctus
4. Benedictus
5. Agnus Dei

Ashley Alden, soprano
Benjamin Harbold, tenor

Jennifer Beattie, alto
Ryan Tibbetts, bass

* *Joy to the World* arr. Lowell Mason

Four Carols for Brass arr. Richard Price
The Mendelsson Brass

Echo Nowell Louis-Claude D'aquin, arr. Thomas R. Vozzella

* *The First Nowell* arr. David Willcocks

Angels We Have Heard on High Arnold Freed

Lo, How A Rose E'er BloomingMichael Praetorius, arr. Shaw-Parker

A Wondrous Birth (Strannoye Rozhdsetvo videshe)Georgy Sviridov

Bring a Torch, Jeanette, Isabellatraditional French carol, arr. Shaw-Parker

* *Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*Felix Mendelssohn

Exaltation (While Shepherds Watched) Carl Ruggles

A Christmas Carol Charles Ives

* *Silent Night* Franz Xaver Gruber

Alan Harler, conductor

Mendelssohn Club Chorus

Michael Stairs, organ

The Mendelssohn Brass

* *The audience is invited to join in the singing of these carols.*

*The use of recording or photographic equipment during this concert
is strictly prohibited. Please turn off audible cell phones and alarms.*

PROGRAM NOTES

This evening's holiday concert, *Angels from on High*, features a mix of the new, the unfamiliar and some traditional favorites. The new is the premiere of a commission from Mendelssohn Club composer-in-residence Donald St. Pierre, *In the Company of Angels*. The unfamiliar includes Louis Vierne's infrequently programmed *Messe Solennelle*, a movement from the 20th century Russian composer Georgy Sviridov's cantata *A Wondrous Birth*, and *Exaltation*, a hymn tune by American composer Carl Ruggles with a delightfully idiosyncratic harmonization.

Donald St. Pierre is now in his seventeenth season as Mendelssohn Club's composer-in-residence. St. Pierre has served on the faculty of the Curtis Institute of Music since 1990. He previously served as principal keyboard player for the Milwaukee Symphony and was music director of Milwaukee's Skylight Music Theater from 1978-1990, where he directed more than 50 productions and composed three chamber operas. He is a contributor to the *AIDS Quilt Songbook* and has served as head coach of the voice department at the Chautauqua Institution and the Bowdoin Summer Music Festival. He is also a much sought after recital accompanist and has appeared at New York's Lincoln Center, London's Wigmore Hall and Almeida Theatre, Paris' Theatre du Chalet, and at the Tanglewood, Santa Fe Chamber Music, Bowdoin, Bard and Grand Teton Music Festivals. St. Pierre has written fourteen works for Mendelssohn Club.



J. L. Shipman

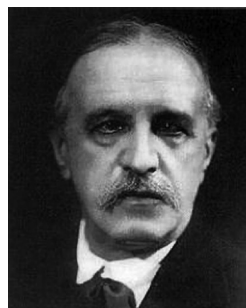
St. Pierre has provided the following notes: "*In the Company of Angels* interweaves texts from Luke in the King James Bible, passages from the great Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg's *Heaven and Hell*, and the familiar carol *Angels We Have Heard on High*. It offers differing perspectives on angels, and I hope that it freshens one's appreciation of the words of the carol. Hearing and seeing angels are audacious but beautiful and inspiring claims. It has been my privilege for many years to write for Mendelssohn Club Chorus accompanied by brass quintet, and I think this cantata is a thought-provoking lead-in to the audience's singing of *Angels We Have Heard on High*."

Swedenborg (1688-1772) was a fascinating individual. He was a distinguished scientist who served as Assessor for Sweden's Board of Mines, was an internationally renowned authority on geology and metallurgy, and developed a surprisingly accurate view of neuronal structure and function. His life took a surprising turn in his mid-50's, when he began having dreams and visions which convinced him that he could travel to the spiritual world, visit heaven and hell, and converse with angels and spirits. For Swedenborg, the spiritual world was a physical place, and his angels were not ephemeral beings but had physical bodies, and ate, drank, slept, woke and worked, their main task being protecting men from evil. He wrote voluminously about his spiritual experiences and theology and gained a wide following. While he had no interest in establishing an organized church, after his death a church based on

his teachings was founded in England in 1787, and though relatively small, has spread around the world. There are interesting local connections as well. The Swedenborg Foundation, a major center for learning and dissemination of Swedenborg's writings, is located in West Chester, and Mendelssohn Club founder W. W. Gilchrist served for many years as organist and music director at Philadelphia's Swedenborgian Church of the New Jerusalem.

St. Pierre uses distinctive settings for the narrative from Luke, the quotations from Swedenborg, and the paraphrases from *Angels We Have Heard on High*. He uses a short fragment of the paraphrase, "angels, we have heard angels" to separate each of the texts, its melody suggesting the contours of the carol tune. The setting of the Swedenborg text is very angular, with wide intervals. The words pour out somewhat breathlessly, as if Swedenborg cannot contain his excitement to describe angels. The carol paraphrases become progressively longer until the music finally segues into the carol itself, and the audience gets to participate in the premiere as they are invited to join in the singing of *Angels We Have Heard on High*.

Louis Vierne (1870-1937) was born with severe cataracts which rendered him essentially blind. When he was six, he underwent an experimental procedure which restored some vision, but he could only read oversized text and wrote music at an easel using a large pad and thick crayon. He was a precocious musical talent who studied theory, piano and violin at Paris' Institute for Blind Youth, where he met the composer and organist César Franck, who steered him toward the organ. He soon began private harmony lessons with Franck and enrolled in his organ course at the Conservatoire de Paris. When Franck was tragically killed in a traffic accident, Vierne began studying with Franck's successor, Charles-Marie Widor. He rapidly developed into a virtuoso performer with a mastery of improvisation. He became Widor's assistant at the Conservatoire and in 1892 became his deputy organist at the fashionable Church of St. Sulpice. In 1900, he won the post of *organist-titulaire* of Notre Dame Cathedral, a prestigious position which had been vacant since the death of Louis-Claude D'aquin (composer of the *Echo Nowell* on this program) in 1772! While prestigious, the position was neither lucrative nor very musically satisfying, for the organ was in very poor repair. Vierne spent the better part of the next two decades raising money for its restoration, giving concert tours in England and the U.S., appearing in Philadelphia and playing a recital on the great Wanamaker Organ. Vierne never achieved an academic position at the Conservatoire, despite having served as an unpaid assistant for 19 years, but he did teach some of the most prominent organists and musicians of the next generation, including Nadia Boulanger, Marcel Dupré and Maurice Duruflé. In June, 1937, Vierne was giving a recital on the now restored Notre Dame organ, assisted by his student Duruflé, when he suffered a fatal heart attack. His foot struck the E pedal, the single tone echoing throughout the cathedral, a wonderfully poetic and fitting end for a man who had devoted his life to his art.



The *Messe Solennelle* in C-sharp minor was written between 1898 and 1900. Vierne originally planned to set it for chorus and orchestra, but Widor persuaded him to prepare a two organ version instead. It was premiered in 1901 at St. Sulpice, with Widor and Vierne at the church's two organ consoles. The term *Solemn Mass* usually signifies a High Mass, in which all the parts of the Ordinary are sung, but Vierne's *Messe Solennelle* omits the *Credo*. It was evidently intended for liturgical use, since the opening for the *Gloria* is not set but rather meant to be intoned by the celebrant. There is a strong chromatic flavor to the *Messe Solennelle* and Vierne displays considerable harmonic freedom. While *solennelle* does not mean serious in this context, there is something foreboding in the descending line of the organ which opens the *Kyrie*. The chorus enters sequentially with a chant-like melody that outlines the C-sharp minor triad. A middle section displays more harmonic freedom before returning at last to the opening melody. The *Gloria* has a similar tripartite structure. After the opening is intoned, the organ immediately takes up an arch-like phrase, creating the feeling that the music was already in motion during the intonation. A long central section, starting with the *Domine Deus*, is more introspective, with a somewhat *misterioso* organ accompaniment. The final *Agnus Dei* is the most lyrical movement, with a long, gentle chant-like melody. An organ line like bells softly ringing and a quiet *dona nobis pacem* brings the work to a close.

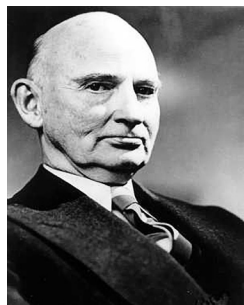
Georgy Sviridov (1915-1998) is probably the most highly regarded Russian composer whose work is virtually unknown in the West. Sviridov was born in a small village near what is now the border between Russia and Ukraine. His musical talent was recognized early and he was sent to music school in his native Kursk and then to the Leningrad Central Music Technical School, where he studied piano and composition.



In 1935, while still a student, he composed the song cycle *Six Romances on Texts by Pushkin*, which won great critical acclaim. The 19-year old Sviridov was invited to join the prestigious Composers Union and was admitted to the Leningrad Conservatory, where he studied composition with Dmitri Shostakovich. While at the Conservatory, he produced a string of highly regarded works, including his *Symphony No. 1* and *Piano Concerto No. 1*, which was premiered by the Leningrad Philharmonic under Yevgeny Mravinsky. While Sviridov composed in many genres, he was particularly drawn to vocal and choral music, creating cantatas with texts by some of Russia's greatest poets and writers. With his strongly neo-romantic style and his interest in music which displayed the Russian character and history, he became the darling of the music establishment. Unlike his mentor Shostakovich, he never directly challenged the establishment, which allowed him considerable artistic freedom. He was able to set the poetry of Boris Pasternak when that author was under official censure, and was able to work religious references and themes into his music because of their historical importance to the Russian character and temperament. After the fall of communism, he was able to openly explore sacred music and produced a steady stream of choral works inspired by the Russian Orthodox liturgy.

Sviridov completed his sacred cantata *Strannoye Rozhdsetvo videshe* (*Having Witnessed a Wondrous Birth*) in 1992 and it was premiered in Moscow that same year. It contains texts taken from the Russian Orthodox Divine Liturgy and the liturgies for the feasts of Christmas and Holy Saturday. The movement *A Wondrous Birth* is taken from the *Akathist to the Most Merciful Savior*. An *akathist* is a hymn or prayer dedicated to a saint, holy event or member of the trinity and used in the Orthodox liturgy on certain feast days, something like a *sequence* in the Roman Catholic liturgy. It is a poetic form consisting of thirteen verses (*kontakions*), each followed by a short litany (*oikos*). Each verse typically ends with an alleluia. Sviridov has set a paraphrase of the eighth *kontakion* for a cappella chorus. The beautifully lyrical music reflects the cadence and shape of Orthodox chant, and he uses divisi chorus to produce an impressive sonority. The lush texture of the music is tempered by the occasional unusual harmony or polytonal chord.

Carl Ruggles (1876-1971) was among the most distinctive voices in American music. He studied violin, theory and composition, the latter with Harvard's John Knowles Paine, the first professor of music at an American institution of higher learning. Ruggles worked variously as a pit violinist, conductor, and educator, but his true passion was composition. In his mature style, he was relentlessly atonal and dissonant, creating thickly textured works using a style christened dissonant counterpoint. He developed a technique of not repeating a pitch for some variable number of notes, until its effect had faded from memory. His compositional technique was very graphic, with works imagined as complex patterns of overlapping lines, and works were very slowly and painstakingly constructed. He compulsively worked and reworked his music, often playing the same chord over and over again until he was satisfied with its sound. (Hearing Ruggles banging away repeatedly on the same chord, composer Henry Cowell once asked Ruggles what he was doing, and he famously replied "I'm giving it the test of time.") It is little wonder that he completed less than a dozen works.



Ruggles began work on *Exaltation* following the death of his wife in 1957 and it is dedicated to her memory. It is the last piece he would write. Despite being only 16 bars in length, it took him a year to complete the work. It is a rather unusual piece for Ruggles, featuring a hymn tune with a wonderfully lyrical, diatonic melody. The harmonization, however, is very idiosyncratic, continually shifting between consonance and dissonance. Ruggles envisioned *Exaltation* as a wordless hymn which might be hummed by the congregation, but it is in the common meter and has been sung to a number of different texts. Here it is used for the carol *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*.

– Michael Moore